

Title: Blessed Are the Upside Down

Text: Matthew 5:1-12

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Date: February 1, 2026

This morning, I want us to ponder a word we use so often that we rarely stop to consider what we mean by it—the word “**blessed**.” After all, the Beatitudes are, at their root, blessings. But when we say we are blessed, what are we really saying?

I feel blessed to be here. Since February 1 of last year, I’ve been with you, and I’ve genuinely enjoyed working with this staff and the Session. In the coming month, we will complete the Mission Study, an important part of the interim process as we dream and discern First Presbyterian’s future together. As your interim pastor, I’ve watched you bless others and hold people in your heart and with your hands as they walk through the valleys of their lives. Yes, God has blessed me to be here during this season of transition, and because of the mutual, caring nature of our ministry together, I think that is a good and faithful use of the word “blessed.”

But I’m not sure we hold that word as carefully as we once did.

This past weekend, I watched a few post-game interviews. The reporter asked the player how he felt after the big win. Without hesitation, the player said, “I’m so blessed.” I don’t doubt his sincerity. But I wondered: what happens next week if they lose? Does the blessing evaporate with the scoreboard? Is being blessed just another way of saying, “I’m on a winning streak”?

We hear the same thing at award shows. Actors clutching a golden statue say, “I’m so blessed to be here.” I’m sure they mean it. My issue isn’t sincerity; it’s simplicity. To equate blessing with victory and applause seems thin. Can someone still be blessed in obscurity? In defeat? In grief? In a struggle?

Here in the South, we have another use. Someone is a little off their game, and we say, “Well, bless his heart.” You who are Southerners know exactly what that means. That’s not always a compliment.

And then there are everyday moments. I was in Publix right before the storm and saw a man reaching high on a shelf for a woman who couldn’t quite reach. He handed her the box. She said, “Thank you so much.” And he said, “I’m just here to serve and be a blessing.” Something about that tone made me pause. Somehow it sounded less like humility and more like self-congratulation.

We don’t just cheapen the word with our lips. Sometimes we empty it with our actions. A three-year-old once watched Saturday college football with his father, and on Sunday, when he saw the pastor raise his hands in benediction, he shouted, “Touchdown!” Funny, yes. But do we sometimes treat blessing as a ritualized touchdown? Something we expect but never ponder. So, what does it mean to give a blessing? What does it mean to be blessed?

How about this one? A pastor was conducting a wedding ceremony. He raised his hand to give the final blessing. The bride misunderstood his gesture and gave him a high-five. Not wanting to exclude the groom, the pastor offered him a high-five, too. The wedding guests roared. Those are funny, aren’t they?

So, I ask, “What does it mean to give a blessing or to be blessed?”

Jesus gives us the Beatitudes, and at the heart of those sayings is the word “Blessed.” I wonder what Jesus meant when he offered his blessings.

Barbara Brown Taylor calls these Beatitudes the **“Blessed Are the Upside Down.”** She says Jesus turns the world upside down so those at the bottom find themselves closest to heaven, and those at the top find themselves looking up.

We have lived in that upside-down world this week. The ice storm in Franklin knocked out power to thousands of homes. Families sat in the dark, wrapped in blankets, listening to trees crack and transformers pop. Some had no heat, no water, and no way to cook. In that moment, blessing didn’t look like comfort or applause. Blessing looked like neighbors checking on neighbors. Blessing looked like sharing generators, bringing soup, opening homes, and calling each other and the elderly to make sure they were safe.

In the dark and cold, blessing was not a feeling; it was a flashlight, a phone call, a warm meal, a hand on a shoulder.

Bono, the singer from the band U2, once said a wise man told him, *“Stop asking God to bless what you’re doing. Get involved in what God is doing, because it’s already blessed.”* Bono realized that God is with the poor, so he joined them to be blessed.

Friends, while we warm our homes again, others are still sitting in darkness and not just in the cold, but in the darkness of fear, grief, and conflict. In Minneapolis, Minnesota, the deployment of thousands of federal immigration agents and a series of shootings by federal officers have ignited widespread protests and deep tensions between citizens, local leaders, and federal authorities. Residents have taken to the streets, and many are calling for accountability and justice after the fatal shootings of community members during enforcement operations. These events have become a focal point for debates about power, human dignity, and how government should serve its people.

Jesus offers us a word when he says, *“Blessed are those who mourn... Blessed are the peacemakers.”* The question for us is simply whether we are joining God where God is already blessing. So, when we say, “God bless you,” let’s change what we mean. Let’s reframe these Beatitudes as challenges.

For the Irish among us, they love a good blessing. Here is one I discovered this week, and I share it with you. Let’s carry these blessings in our hearts:

- **May God bless you with discomfort that pushes you into deeper compassion.**
- **May God bless you with anger that fuels justice.**
- **May God bless you with tears that lead to tenderness.**
- **May God bless you with just enough foolish courage to believe you can make a difference.**

And I’ve seen that holy blessing in this congregation during the ice storm. Some of you were angry not at God, but at how fragile our systems are and how quickly the most vulnerable are left in the dark. That anger became phone calls, rides, warming spaces, and neighborly care. That is holy anger grown up into justice.

And when we look at what is happening in places like Minneapolis, maybe we are right to feel anger at violence and misuse of power. Yet notice how Jesus blesses. Other than the turning of the temple tables, he does not rage to destroy. Absolutely not! Even in the Temple, his rage was to restore and notice his life to the very end, stood in stark relief against such wrongful, destructive rage. Rather, Jesus blesses anger that becomes peacemaking, advocacy building, mentoring, reform, and presence with the vulnerable. When we support community rebuilding, protest for accountability, sit with those who mourn, and work for peace among those in conflict, *that* is God's anger transfigured into justice. Maybe, perhaps, that is God's blessing in motion.

In a world that measures success by comfort, applause, and power, God's blessings call us into participation with the "other": walking with the poor, comforting the grieving, making peace where there is conflict, acting where there is need. In storms, power outages, violence, and fear, blessing is not abstract. God's blessing is present in our hands, our care, and our witness.

Friends, when we follow Jesus into his upside-down kingdom, we may look around—slightly dizzy—and say with wonder, "Wait... this is what blessed really means?" And in that moment, we realize we are not just blessed. We are part of the Upside-Down Blessing this world desperately needs. Amen.